

Name: _____ Class: _____

Sympathy

By Paul Laurence Dunbar
1899

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) was an African American poet, novelist, and playwright. He was born in Dayton, Ohio, to parents who had been enslaved in Kentucky before the American Civil War. In this poem, Dunbar uses the experiences of a caged bird to comment on the oppression of African Americans following the Civil War. As you read, take note of how the bird's experiences translate to the experiences of African Americans.

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing
grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;
When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,
And the faint perfume from its chalice[1] steals[2]
—

I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting —
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore, —
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings —
I know why the caged bird sings!



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